

Kenneth K. Sereno,¹ Ph.D.

Source Credibility

REFERENCE: Sereno, K. K., "Source Credibility," *Journal of Forensic Sciences*. JFSCA. Vol. 28, No. 2, April 1983, pp. 532-536.

SYNOPSIS: This paper conceptualizes and describes specific qualities of source credibility. Implications of the conception for communication in general and for expert witnesses in particular are elaborated. Dimensions of credibility, the role of the attorney, delivery, dialect, ethnic background, clothing, and characteristics of juries are considered.

KEYWORDS: symposium, jurisprudence, juries, testimony, credibility, expert witness

Source credibility has a long and noble history in the study of communication. It goes back to ancient Greece and it comes out of classical rhetorical theory that was concerned with persuasion. Aristotle, for example, talked about three major forms of proof that a communicator can use. In his book, *The Rhetoric*, he said the three forms of proof are ethos, or ethical proof, logos or logical proof, and pathos or emotional proof. He considered ethos the most persuasive. Aristotle suggested that the qualities of ethos or credibility resided within the speaker. Thus, if you were knowledgeable, competent, and had high moral character, you *would be* a persuasive communicator. And this is behind some of the questions people ask. They ask, "What can I do to be credible?" The assumption behind such a question is that credibility is within the speaker, and that if you do certain things you will punch the right buttons in the listeners and certain effects will occur. Unfortunately (or fortunately), such is not the case.

The current term that people in communication are using is not ethos, but source credibility, and it reflects not only a change in terminology, but a change in orientation and conceptualization. *Source credibility*, as it is looked at by communication researchers today, is a perceptual process, and *resides in the audience*. If it were inherent within the communicator, all jurors would respond similarly to all expert witnesses. There would be no deviation in response. But we know that is not true. People respond differently to the same communicator. Some people may perceive the communicator to be highly credible, others may conceive the communicator to be lacking in credibility. This is not to imply that qualities and characteristics of the communicator are unimportant. They are important. But what actually happens when we deal with this issue of source credibility is that there is an interaction between qualities and characteristics that the jury brings to the situation and the qualities and characteristics of the communicator. Depending upon a juror's psychological

The opinions or assertions contained herein are the private views of the author and are not to be construed as official or reflecting the views of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. Presented at the Symposium on Effective Expert Testimony, 33rd Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, Los Angeles, CA, 17-20 Feb. 1981. Received for publication 2 Aug. 1982; accepted for publication 9 Aug. 1982.

¹Associate professor, Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

state, this individual will focus on different things, organize the material that an expert discusses in different ways, and formulate different inferences about what was said. Jurors do this differently because they are coming from "different places." What are the implications?

I suggest that there are two implications. One, specific communication behaviors that you engage in will not necessarily produce one-to-one reactions. So do not look for a prescription. The second implication I have already alluded to. Unless you know the qualities and characteristics of the jurors, you cannot prescribe beforehand absolute qualities of the expert witness that will be effective. As was clearly pointed out by a previous speaker, what is considered to be effective or ineffective depends upon, for example, the part of the country that the individual is from—the cultural norms and expectations, and so forth. There is no magic formula or pill. Eric Weber made a pile of money on a little book called *How to Pick Up Girls [1]*. He gave prescriptions of all the things one can do. And they do not work! These books never work. People wish they would work, but they do not because people cannot be categorized in real life as they can be in a book. I will now discuss some of the research that actually has gone on in the area of source credibility.

This research really began in earnest on a scientific basis back in the 1940s. It started during WW II, actually, when people began doing research on propaganda effects. There were a few prior studies, but no systematic body of research. What was found from this research was that certain people were more persuasive than others, but they did not know why exactly. So the search went on to try to find out what the components of credibility were that led to the effectiveness of a particular communicator's presentation. This led to a flurry of research that bloomed between the mid 1960s and the mid 1970s that attempted to identify the major factors, components, and dimensions of source credibility. Researchers used a technique called factor analysis, which attempts to see how a multitude of characteristics can be broken down into a few fundamental elementary qualities or characteristics.

A whole spate of research was done attempting to find out what the fundamental dimensions of credibility were. This research focused on trying to identify *what* the *dimensions* were and secondly on *how to measure* these reactions. There has been little research on verbal and nonverbal communication as it is directly related to specific dimensions of credibility. Most of the advice that is given in the area, particularly as it relates to the courtroom, is based upon a few isolated studies and courtroom experience. There is little solid scientific research on the effects of particular communication qualities to credibility of expert witnesses. Conclusions or inferences that people make have to be taken with a great deal of caution. Some of the major dimensions of credibility about which researchers seem to have reached a fair amount of unanimity across a wide variety of studies follow.

These factors or dimensions are called by different names but they refer to the same quality or dimension. One major component of credibility is what might be called competence, expertise, or authoritativeness. A second important dimension of credibility is what might be called trustworthiness or character. A third fairly consistent dimension that researchers have identified is called dynamism. These three dimensions seem to be consistently identified by people who are attempting to determine the major components of credibility. Other components have been identified but do not appear consistently, such as co-orientation and charisma. One of the interesting theoretical notions that is being toyed with and talked about and studied to a certain extent, but not established absolutely, is that of the three dimensions one might intuitively assume that expertise is the most important. But trustworthiness is often proposed by theorists as being more important, and I think that was demonstrated by the examples that some of the other speakers gave. Jurors may not have understood the testimony. But if there was a quality of trust and believability that seemed to come forth from the expert witness's testimony, that was influential. Let me discuss some of the possible applications of this theoretic kind of orientation to expert witnesses.

The role of the attorney is significant. The attorney has a responsibility to help establish the credibility of a witness. He must be careful to ask questions ensuring that competence is

established through expertise, knowledge, and experience. That certainly is important. But the other dimension of character or trustworthiness has to be brought forth also if you are going to be maximally effective. The kinds of questions that the attorney must ask that produce the idea of trustworthiness are ones that deal with the potential or the lack of bias that your witness has. If you do not establish that your witness is unbiased, you may hurt his or her's credibility. The manner in which the attorney questions the witness can have a lot to do with the way the jury will perceive the credibility of that witness.

If the attorney in direct examination cuts the witness off or attempts to dominate the conversation, one of the perceptual consequences may be that the jury might feel that the attorney does not trust the competence or intelligence of the witness. Why is the attorney cutting the expert off? And, as was pointed out, you have to work closely with the witness so that there is some expectation about length of discussion, so that the expert witness is not led to believe that he will be explaining or expressing ideas in great detail and the attorney in his own mind is looking for short answers. In cross-examination the point has already been made that cutting off a witness or using snideness or sarcasm in delivery may make certain logical points, but could hurt in terms of the jury's reaction, because they may feel that the attorney is not being fair. Let me move now to a consideration of actual verbal behavior of the witness.

One major characteristic of a witness's presentation that seems to make a witness credible is that the delivery seems thoughtful. The person is "right here" and is thinking about the question and responding in an immediate way. This is in contrast to what might be a very thoroughly rehearsed presentation. People sense rehearsed presentations. They may not be able to tell you why, but they can tell. One of the problems that comes about when there is a rehearsed presentation is that during cross-examination the expert witness's delivery will be totally different. This discrepancy could possibly hurt credibility.

What characteristics of delivery can influence your credibility? There are a whole list but I will discuss just a few. For example, the pronunciation of words is important. The dialect is important depending upon the locale of the trial. For example, most Americans do not have a positive attitude of people who speak a dialect other than the one they speak. Americans tend to have positive attitudes toward certain British dialects—not all—but some. We tend to have negative reactions to dialects that are not quite American sounding. I am speaking in very broad sweeping terms; if you have a very strong southern accent and you are giving expert testimony in Los Angeles, you may not be as credible as if you were giving expert testimony in Louisiana. Some of the research that has been done in this area suggests that people with different dialects are perceived not only as having differing intellectual capacities, but their moral character is also perceived as being different; people of certain differing dialects (for example, ethnic minorities) are perceived as not having the same high moral standards as people who speak in a general American dialect. So if you are an expert witness or are dealing with an expert witness who comes from a different region of the country this is something that you should consider. It may not necessarily hurt you, but there are people who do tend to respond this way.

In terms of language, it has already been noted that jargon has its good and bad points. A certain amount of jargon is necessary and important, and the *good* expert witness will give the parenthetical explanation of what the expression means so that the lay person on the jury will understand. This will enhance the witness's credibility because it shows the expert's sensitivity to the person who is attempting to understand the testimony.

In some of the research that I have done, I have focused on the effects of presentational characteristics such as nonfluencies and disruptions in speech, such as "uh," "ers," stutters, repetitions, and tongue slips on perceptions of credibility. I have done a series of studies in which I have attempted to determine the effects of increasing numbers of nonfluencies inserted into a 15-min presentation upon perceptions of credibility and persuasive impact. One of the interesting findings is that as nonfluencies and disruptions increase, judgments of competence went down, which is what you would expect. But, fascinatingly enough, percep-

tions of trustworthiness did not go down; and, the speaker was still capable of producing strong persuasive impact. Perceptions of "competence" that might be related to fluency do not necessarily diminish persuasive impact.

Nonverbal characteristics include clothing. Depending upon the area of the country that you are in, cultural expectations of proper clothing differ. In a metropolitan area such as Los Angeles, the most appropriate colors to jurors who are middle class or higher are deep blues, blues, grays, whites, and tans, never green and never dark brown. The same colors apply with dresses. Dark brown does not come off well. If you are coming to the courtroom and it is a rainy day, your raincoat must always be beige or tan, never black. In terms of dress, if we continued it would come down to fine points such as the necktie you wear and how neckties represent differing status levels. So depending upon the status level of the jury, you would wear a different type of tie. For example, the highest status tie is a solid color tie that is either blue or wine colored basically and has a very small subtle pattern; a club pattern, for instance, would be very good with middle class and upper middle class jurors. But if you were not dealing with receivers who were of that status level, you would *not* want to come in with a deep navy blue pinstripe suit with a silver tie that had subtle gray dots on it. Even if this is very elegant, you would not do that. You would wear a medium blue suit and a burgundy tie, which is more typically middle class.

Now we could refer to many items like these. Remember that these are just generalizations, and do not necessarily fit all situations. So if you are looking for particular characteristics it is difficult to say that if you do *this* you will always be perceived as credible. If you do *that* you will not. As an illustration, people who have dogmatic personalities—who are authoritarian in their own approach to life—tend to respond very favorably to people who speak in absolute and categorical ways. On the other hand, people who are more "open-minded" and less dogmatic do not respond favorably to people who speak in absolute categorical terms. These people feel that nothing is absolute, that there is always some weakness or difficulty. Thus, when you speak too glibly and too broadly the latter group will respond negatively. Is the juror an authoritarian type who needs some kind of absolute structure, or is the individual nonauthoritarian or nondogmatic?

One other example: if you are dealing with jury members who are highly intelligent, research tends to suggest that when testimony seems to reflect only one side or point of view, this does not go over well because highly intelligent people tend to know that there is more than one side to an issue and that there are likely to be some loopholes and difficulties in your particular interpretation. If you are dealing with jurors who are not particularly intelligent and you strongly present an absolutely one-sided point of view you are likely to be believed, because such individuals may not have the intellectual capacity to know that there are probably weaknesses in any perspective or point of view, that there are inferences and interpretations that have to be made, and that there are gaps.

One final note about dialects. European dialects are variously rated. People who have Germanic type dialects, Austrian dialects, Viennese dialects, and so on, are sometimes perceived lower in credibility because Americans tend to perceive speakers of this dialect as having authoritarian personalities. And when one says "dis" and "dat" for *this* and *that*, many Americans have a negative attitude toward that particular dialect for it sometimes reflects a lower social class.

Conclusion

So there are a variety of qualities and characteristics of the witness that can influence the juror, but there is no single variable that uniformly will produce a single effect. You first must consider qualities and characteristics of jurors that seem to be primarily important; then determine how these qualities affect what juries select as being important and unimportant in expert witnesses.

Reference

[1] Weber, E. *How to Pick Up Girls*, Symphony Press, New York, 1970.

Bibliography

- Aronson, E. and Golden, B. W. "The Effects of Relevant and Irrelevant Aspects of Communicator Credibility on Opinion Change," *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 30, 1962, pp. 115-136.
- Baudhuin, E. S. "Obscene Language and Source Credibility: An Experimental Study," paper presented to the International Communication Association, April 1971.
- Bowers, J. W. "The Influence of Delivery on Attitudes towards Concepts and Speakers," *Speech Monographs*, Vol. 32, 1965, pp. 154-158.
- Lemert, J. B. "Dimensions of Source Credibility," paper presented to the Association for Education in Journalism, Aug. 1963.
- Miller, G. R. and Baseheart, J. "Source Trustworthiness, Opinionated Statements, and Response to Persuasive Communication," *Speech Monographs*, Vol. 36, 1969, pp. 1-7.
- McCroskey, J. C. "Scales for the Measurement of Ethos," *Speech Monographs*, Vol. 33, 1966, pp. 65-72.
- Ostermeier, T. H. "Effects of Type and Frequency of Reference on Perceived Source Credibility and Attitude Change," *Speech Monographs*, Vol. 34, 1967, pp. 137-144.
- Sereno, K. K. and Hawkins, G. J. "The Effects of Variations in Speakers' Nonfluency upon Audience Ratings of Attitude toward the Speech Topic and Speakers' Credibility," *Speech Monographs*, Vol. 34, 1967, pp. 58-64.
- Snyder, M. and Rothbart, M. "Communicator Attractiveness and Opinion Change," *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science*, Vol. 3, 1971, pp. 377-387.
- Warren, I. D. "The Effect of Credibility in Sources in Testimony on Audience Attitudes Towards Speaker and Message," *Speech Monographs*, Vol. 36, 1969, pp. 456-458.
- Whitehead, J. L. "Factors of Source Credibility," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 54, 1968, pp. 59-63.

Address requests for reprints or additional information to
Dr. Kenneth Sereno
Department of Communication Arts and Sciences
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA 90007